

Oral Statement of Olivia Golden, Director

“Promoting the Best Interests of Children: Proposals to Establish a Family Court in the District of Columbia Superior Court”

Before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring and the District of Columbia

October 25, 2001

Good morning Chairman Durbin, and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Olivia Golden, and I am the recently appointed Director of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) of the District of Columbia. I am most appreciative of this opportunity to testify on behalf of Mayor Williams.

I would like to commend the Subcommittee, Senators Landrieu and DeWine, and Representatives DeLay and Norton for your commitment and leadership on this legislation, and Judge King, Judge Satterfield, and Judge Walton for the time they have dedicated to regular planning with us at CFSA.

The Mayor strongly supports the proposals under discussion at this hearing, because they represent major steps forward toward his key goals of safety, permanence, and well being for the District’s most vulnerable children. Enacting court reform now would coincide with the major changes we are making within CFSA and other city agencies.. Delay in enacting this important legislation would risk stalling reform and

failing to seize this moment of opportunity for the District's children. In addition, the Mayor believes that full funding for the Court's and the District's implementation of the legislation is critical to reaping the benefits of reform.

CFSA is responsible for addressing child abuse and neglect in the District of Columbia. It came into existence as a Cabinet-level agency on June 16, 2001, at the close of the Federal court receivership. Its enabling legislation, enacted in April 2001, represents landmark reform in the District's ability to serve children in a unified and accountable manner.

To serve abused and neglected children, CFSA connects closely with multiple public and private agencies whose functions are inextricably intertwined. The Superior Court is an integral part of this system, conducting more than 1,400 abuse and neglect hearings were scheduled in September 2001.

This complex system of services in the District has a long history of failing to deliver successful outcomes for children. We have an extraordinary opportunity today in the District to dramatically change this history, by strengthening all elements of the system together. This is because of the work of Mayor Williams and the City Council to address a wide range of critical systemic deficits. For example:

- We were able to successfully transition out of Federal court receivership.

- CFSA's budget increased by more than \$30 million from FY2000 to FY2001, to make possible critical steps to support children.
- The District is currently implementing a major commitment to expansion and reform of the legal support provided to CFSA.
- CFSA's enabling legislation required the unification of the child abuse and neglect systems, which we achieved on schedule on October 1, 2001, thus ending a fractured service delivery model identified as a barrier in providing effective services to families.
- The District has promulgated both foster and group home regulations which will make it possible to support and enforce high standards of quality.

Without Family Court reform, we risk sharply reducing the impact of these reforms.

With Family Court reform, we will be able to create the maximum impact.

Two aspects of the proposed legislation stand out as key. **First**, every single one of the Mayor's reforms will be most effective for children if implemented in conjunction with a core group of 12-15 highly trained and well-supported judges, as in the proposed legislation, rather than with the full 59 judges who now handle abuse and neglect cases.

Second, both legislative proposals envision key resources and supports that are critical to improving the speed and quality of decision-making in abuse and neglect cases.

In addition to the Mayor's strong support of prompt enactment, my written testimony provides four specific comments on the proposed legislation. I will highlight two here:

1. First, we believe that a key element of successful reform is ensuring that child abuse and neglect cases are concentrated with a core group of well-trained and well-supported judges. We strongly urge the Subcommittee to defer to the House provision in regard to circumstances where judges can take cases with them when they leave the Family Court, because we believe that it is appropriately limited to the most extraordinary cases. We are concerned that the broader exception in the Senate proposal could lead to continued wider dispersal of cases, making it much more difficult to reap the benefits of reform.

In regard to the initial transfer of cases, we believe that transfer of cases to the Family Court should occur as expeditiously as possible.

Second, resources and staffing are critical to meeting the goals of the reform. We strongly urge the Subcommittee to fully address the Court's needs. In addition, the Mayor has identified approximately \$6 million, as an additional Federal appropriation required in FY 02, to meet the District's responsibilities under the legislation, including \$5 million to support integration across computer systems and \$1 million for the central liaison and agency on-site representatives.

In conclusion, we believe a strong Family Court is the final piece needed as we strive to improve the District's child welfare system, and it is needed now. Thank you.